

The uses of Zeuses

Karim Arafat

There are many different aspects of Zeus, almost, in fact, different Zeuses. Therefore he had a universal appeal and adaptability to many purposes. This is clear from the great number of cults of Zeus found throughout the Greek world. To mention just a few of his guises, Zeus was god of rain, thunder and lightning; he was Zeus the Purifier, Zeus the Controller of Destiny, Zeus the Warder-off of Evil; also Zeus of Persuasion, and Zeus of Justice. There was even a White Zeus, a Zeus Averter of Flies, a Zeus in a Tree, and a Zeus in Bed (patron god of Sunday mornings, perhaps?). With so many versions of Zeus available, each citizen would be able to choose his preferred one to worship, in addition, no doubt, to the particular ones favoured by the state. Each version of Zeus would have had his own rites and quite possibly his own shrine.

But this division of Zeus into many sub-headings in no sense detracted from his overall importance, nor from his presiding role as the leader of the pantheon. In fact, it enhanced it: unlike other gods, Zeus has real omniscience, as these many and varied cults show, and the fact that he was not primarily associated with anyone city, unlike Athena for example, gave him an unmatched range of 'duties', and consequently a very different appeal to the average Greek, and a unique place in their lives. In short, 'Father of men and gods' seems a pretty fair description of Zeus. He could be all things to all men. Everygod one might almost say.

The Olympia version

In any assessment of Zeus' importance to the ancient man in the street, a good starting point is the buildings and statues dedicated to him. The most famous statue was that housed in the temple of Zeus built at Olympia between about 472 and 457 B.C. This was made by Pheidias, the top sculptor of his day, and we have a detailed description of it by Pausanias who saw it in the second century A.D., although the statue itself has long since been lost. This is a typical extract: 'The god is made of gold and ivory. There is a wreath on his head like twigs and leaves of olive; in his right hand he is holding a victory of gold and ivory with a ribbon and a wreath on her head; in the god's left hand is a staff in blossom with every kind of precious metal, and the bird perching on his staff is Zeus' eagle. The god's sandals are gold and so is his cloak, and the cloak is inlaid with animals and flowing lilies. The throne is finely worked with gold and gems, and with ebony and with ivory. There are animals painted on it and figures worked on it; and four Victories dancing on the four feet of the throne, with two more at the bottom of each of the four feet'. And so on. No wonder it became known as one of the seven wonders of the world.

It has to be admitted that not everyone shared this view of the enormous gold and ivory statues like that of Zeus: the writer Lucian (a contemporary of Pausanias) said that if you looked inside such statues, to the wooden framework, all you saw was nuts and bolts and packs of rats.

Zeus at Athens

The biggest of all the many temples dedicated to Zeus is found in Athens, a city which owed its first allegiance to its patron deity, Athena. The temple of Olympian Zeus has an unusually long history. It was started about 520 B.C. by the family of the tyrant Peisistratos, but work stopped on it when the family was expelled and the tyranny ended about ten years later. This decision seems to have been taken because the temple was associated with the unpopular tyrants, and we do not know whether anyone thought it disrespectful to Zeus to stop work on his temple. It was left for about 350 years, until King Antiochus IV Epiphanes of Asia Minor employed a Roman architect, one Cossutius, to build it. We do not know how much Cossutius built, but we do know that part of his work was undone in 86 B.C. when the Roman general Sulla destroyed Athens and took a column of the Zeus temple to Rome. Suetonius tells us that some kings friendly to Rome intended to finish the temple and dedicate it to Augustus, but we have no signs that they ever did so.

The temple was finally dedicated in A.D. 131-2, some 650 years after it had been started. The man who finished it was the Emperor Hadrian, a lover of Greece and Classical Greek art who also did much building in many other parts of Greece. Never one to do things on a modest scale, he finished it with over one hundred columns and in a precinct bounded with over one hundred and thirty statues of himself, dedicated by allied cities.

Hadrian felt a particular affinity with Zeus, and wore his hair and beard in the manner of the Zeus at Olympia. But his interest in Zeus was not altogether pious: he had coins minted with Zeus on one side and himself looking like Zeus on the other. This shows how he wanted to associate himself with the ruler of the gods, and be seen, in effect, as a semi-divine ruler on earth in Zeus' image.

Hadrian's use and abuse of Zeus shows that even the highest god could be adapted to a desired purpose, at least by those men who were important and wealthy enough to make such use of him. But even in Classical times, it is difficult to know exactly what Zeus meant to the average Greek. Here a closer look at the mythology and cults associated with Zeus shows the different aspects or him.

Zeus in love and in war

There are myths in which Zeus is a central figure, such as his many amorous pursuits, whether of the beautiful boy Ganymede, or of various nymphs and nymphets such as Aigina and Thetis. On occasion, Zeus can even transform himself into another creature if it will help his cause: he changed into a bull to pursue Europa, a swan for Leda, and rain for Danae. A versatile god indeed.

In other myths, Zeus demands to be taken more seriously, as when he helps the other gods fight the Giants or the Titans. In these scenes he used his thunderbolt to fry his opponent. In one case Salmoneus, the King of Salmone near Olympia, imitated Zeus and claimed that he could thunder louder than the god himself: for this rash impiety, he soon felt the wrong end of Zeus' own thunderbolt. The thunderbolt was a source of destruction and pain for those who opposed Zeus: but it was also a source of endless twiddles and frills for artists, no doubt another reason for Zeus' popularity in art.

K. W. Arafat is Lecturer in Classical Archaeology at King's College, London, and author of Classic Zeus: a Study in Art and Literature (1990). He has recently defected to Zeus' brother, Poseidon, whose sanctuary at Isthmia, near Corinth, he is helping to excavate.